

Always Connected, But Hard to Reach

Despite students' connected lifestyle, colleges and universities often fail to reach them with timely and relevant information

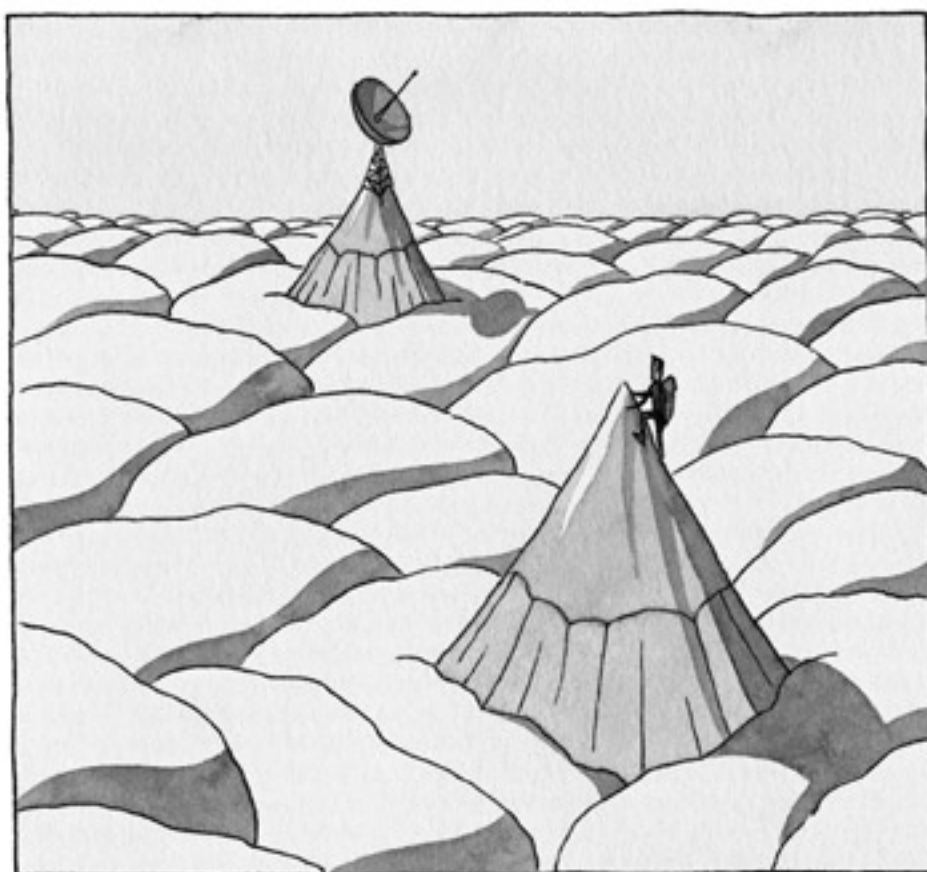
By **Raju Rishi**

Students seem to be always connected through their computers, personal digital assistants (PDAs), or mobile phones, making it easy to reach them—if you are a peer. For colleges and universities, reaching students with timely and relevant information often proves a challenge. With rapid changes in both technology and social practices, what should higher education do to ensure effective communications with students now and in the future?

A key element of the communication barrier is the fragmented nature of students' media. Contemporary students use a new and different model for communication and information access, one created by the Internet and fueled by mobile technology. This predisposition makes it difficult for colleges and universities to reach their student populations via “traditional” channels and can broaden the divide between an administration and its students.

For colleges and universities to bridge the communication gap, they must not only accept that the mobile revolution has indeed arrived but also better understand their options for effectively communicating with their students. Almost all students already own PCs and are accustomed to getting official institutional communications by e-mail or posted on the Web.¹ The single biggest new opportunity for more-effective communication involves the mobile phones that most students carry today. According to *The Horizon Report*,

For many students, mobile phones belong to the set of necessary



equipment without which they do not leave the house. If we can first recognize how students use mobile phones and then design activities that will help them access educational materials, form learning communities, and participate in rich conversations that take advantage of those avenues, we will be able to ride the wave of mobile technology right alongside them.²

Understanding Students' Communication Preferences

Students decide how to communicate based on several factors:

- The level of time sensitivity, anonymity, and interaction desired
- The duration and richness of media preferred for the communication experience
- Whether the communication is public,

private, or intended to be shared with many people at once

For example, if a student needs to communicate an urgent message, he would probably call or text message the recipient's mobile phone. He anticipates a response—some level of acknowledgment of the message. An e-mail sent to a student's .edu account, however, may be left unread for weeks depending on how many accounts he maintains and his daily practices. Thus, an urgent, emergency message (such as a severe weather alert) has a better chance of reaching students quickly if sent via broadcast text messaging directly to every student's mobile phone. Most colleges and universities, however, have not yet addressed the technical and social problems involved in making this shift, from obtaining the necessary phone numbers to broadcasting the message to multiple (perhaps thousands of) recipients.

Students might choose a different communication method depending on whether they want that communication to be public or private or to have a desired level of anonymity. Popular Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook offer tangible proof that students are often willing to communicate many details of their lives in public forums. Students might also choose a communication channel that lets them communicate with many others at once. For example, a student in her dorm room might choose to group text-message her study partners, asking where they want to meet for a final-exam study session.

Trying to reach students at their residence hall landline phones is probably one of the least-effective communication approaches, as most do not even plug in a landline phone or configure or check voicemail. They are accustomed to an untethered existence. Even when a landline is available, many students use their mobile phones exclusively.

According to a recent EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research study, most students (85 percent) prefer e-mail to Web reporting, IM, or paper for official institutional communications.³ Their choice of communication method thus seems sensitive to the nature of the communication as well, with students

preferring less-formal communications from their peers (80 percent exchange IM, and 70 percent use social Web sites⁴) and more-formal e-mail from their universities.

Communication Ownership

In addition to bringing their preferred communication channels to campus, students bring a sense of ownership. Previously, students were captive audiences for universities' chosen technology. If students needed to make a call, they had to use the campus landlines at the prevailing long-distance rates. If they had to send e-mail, the institution provided the connection and an e-mail account. At times, the institution even provided the computers students used for e-mail and academic work. If they wanted to review recordings of lectures and other class materials or consult library resources, students had to go to the physical location where the critical media were stored. Now, they can do all those things from multiple locations thanks to mobile devices and wireless access to the Internet and university intranets.

Today, students have a choice of technologies and ownership of them. They bring their own cell phones to campus and use them for calling, often choosing not to share the phone numbers with the institution. They bring their own e-mail and IM accounts and their own computers. And that last bastion of institutional communication—the .edu portal—has arguably given way to social sites like MySpace, Facebook, or Daily Jolt. College and university administrators no longer own the communication channels central to student life. They can, however, learn to become vital participants in the communication methods that students prefer.

The Role of Technology in How Students Communicate

To reach their students, colleges and universities need to understand the impact of time-and-place shifting on communication and content. Digital media recorders and mobile devices such as iPods and mobile phones free students

from time or viewing constraints. This new freedom allows students to choose the communication channel that best suits them "in the moment." If they are between classes, they might use their mobile phone, PDA, or laptop/notebook computer to get updates regarding class cancellations, social events, and the menu in the dining hall. Understanding the impact that time-and-place shifting has on students' preferred communication channels and their priorities will help colleges and universities claim space on their students' busy communication radar.

The Impact on Learning

Embracing students' communication preferences involves understanding how current technology alters students' perspectives, specifically their perceived role in various communications. The advent of the Internet and mobile technology has created a "lean forward" mindset in contrast to the "lean back" attitude while watching television. Because of laptop/notebook computers, mobile phones, and other portable electronic devices, students are accustomed to being fully engaged. Today's students are accustomed to a more interactive role in both communication and learning. Higher education institutions need to recognize the need for constant interaction and accept that mobile technology, especially mobile phones, might be among the best new tools to engage students in academics—despite the acknowledged risk of distraction introduced by laptops and mobile phones in the classroom. A key advantage of mobile phones is that students are already skilled in their use.

Using their mobile phones, students can choose the mobile groups in which they wish to engage (a specific class, study group, or social club, for example) and receive text messages from that group. They can also use their mobile phones to more fully participate in the classroom via live, in-class polling during a lecture. Interactive polling lends itself well to students' preferences for engagement, and the appeal of anonymity is substantial:

We know that many students who are silent in classroom discussions find their voice and participate actively in different flavors of mediated interaction.⁵

Furthermore, research has revealed that learning in smaller chunks, both in class and out, may boost overall understanding and retention of information. Mobile devices facilitate such learning.

Seize the Opportunity: Mobilize!

Every new challenge brings opportunity. Students' range of choices in technology and their preference for mobile phones in communicating with their peers challenges colleges and universities to look beyond traditional media to promote effective interaction. A real opportunity exists for those institutions willing to innovate and leverage mobile phones to communicate with students, engage them more actively in the campus community, and facilitate their academic achievement and personal development.

Students want to feel engaged, to be connected, and to learn and grow. But they prefer tools that are convenient and comfortable and fit their mobile lifestyle. The opportunity to engage students is there for the taking. Fewer opportunities have presented such wide-ranging potential—if higher education institutions can learn to reach students using their preferred communication methods.

Fortunately, some good examples of institutional mobile phone programs can serve as guides. The basics, such as collecting mobile phone numbers on an opt-in basis for delivery of emergency broadcast alerts, are a no-brainer. More advanced options include creating a university mobile phone program that provides students with discounts on phones and plans while delivering a wider range of academic and community value. The right approach will depend on each institution's current situation and goals. Students have already migrated much of their lives to mobile

devices, which means there is no better time to begin engaging them through their preferred communication methods. *e*

Endnotes

1. About 98 percent of students own PCs according to G. Salaway et al., *The ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2006* (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, Research Study 7, 2006), <<http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERS0607>>.
2. New Media Consortium and EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, "The Horizon Report: 2006 Edition," <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/CSD4387.pdf>>.
3. Salaway, op. cit.
4. Ibid.
5. Chris Dede as interviewed by Mary Grush, "Changing the Gold Standard for Instruction," *Campus Technology*, June 1, 2006, <<http://www.campustechnology.com/article.asp?id=18568>> (retrieved February 8, 2007).

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